

Francisco Vaz da Silva, *Metamorphosis: The dynamics of symbolism in European fairy tales*, “International Folkloristics” 1, prefaced by Alan Dundes, New York, Peter Lang, 2002

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...for every myth told, there is another, unnameable, that is not told, another which beckons from the shadows, surfacing only through allusions, fragments, coincidences, with nobody ever daring tell all in a single story.

Roberto Callasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*

In his book, F. Vaz da Silva chooses fairytales as his “pointers to universals in human thinking [...] heuristical[ly] define[d] as relevant dimensions of European mythism” which will “prove fruitful in crosscultural analysis involving non-European representations” (9). If fairytales will be his tools, metamorphosis — “where fundamental symbols thrive” (*loc.cit.*) — will be the touchstone of his enquiry.

Vaz da Silva brings together what, on the surface of consciousness and of stories, should be kept apart — as with incest, as phrased by Lévi-Strauss and quoted by our author: “like the solved enigma, incest unites terms that ought to remain separate” (213). We surrender into seeing the hidden identity between the Dragon Slayer and Cinderella, and between these and the story of Oedipus; this we do when we agree to see the evidence of a series of equivalences which bring to the surface an underlying pattern. This pattern includes seeing “the fairy tale scheme of marriage as incest [...] migrated from the enchanted realms of folklore into the thinking of two of the most influential minds in Western thought”, Freud and Lévi-Strauss (243). These voices are heard throughout the book, conversing with many others — such as R. Callasso, A. K. Coomaraswamy, C. Ginzburg, B. Holbek, C. D. Knight, M.-L. Ténèze, J.-P. Vernant, Y. Verdier — in a brilliant and often harsh discussion led by the author to make sense of the apparent non-sense of fairytales. This theoretical conversation is combined with a dazzling network of equivalences within fairytales and across, with myths and ethnography.

Chapter 1, “Fairy tales and ethnography”, “aims at establishing that fairy tales belong in a Weltanschauung of ontological monism that postulates periodic alternation through metamorphosis, between everyday reality and the other world” (9). Here, beliefs and practices connected with werewolves in the Iberian Peninsula are understood as a “comparative stance [...] required to decipher [...] transformations on fundamental themes” (58), also present in fairy tales and in the ethnographic context. The author encompasses a wide network of equivalences so as to establish a “fundamental schema” of give and take between this world and the other world — “ecstasies, shamans and heroes retrieving imprisoned ‘seeds’, ‘souls’, ‘water of life’, etc., from the realm of the death [to] ensure the circulation of life” —, a theme recurrently developed throughout the book in connection with other tales and myths, namely *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Dragon Slayer* and Oedipus. Such a notion implies, for instance, the necessity of the “death of Cinderella’s [sic] mother after the birth of her mirror-image daughter” (42; please read *Peau d’Âne*, AT 510B).

Chapter 2, “Metamorphosis and Ontological Complexity”, “establishes [...] a persistent symbolic nexus of metamorphosis to sloughing, self-sacrifice and bleeding” (9), drawing on Scandinavian and Greek myths as well as on the Book of Genesis. Metamorphosis is then connected with “the overall logic of cyclicity” (*loc. cit.*): images like the sloughing of the serpent / of the werewolf; the shedding of the hide / rags in *Peau d’Âne* / *Cinderella*; the kissing that transforms the Loathly Bride; the killing of the dragon — they are all images of metamorphosis that reflect the same process of cyclical rejuvenation, illustrated throughout the book. Further building blocks are created on the connections between sloughing and physical blindness, and these with renewal and foresight; and all these with the blood of feminine mysteries — and incest: “he who drinks, in some way, his own blood gains foresight” (70); “clairvoyance relates to metamorphosis on the model of serpent sloughing — and this relates fundamentally to femininity” (76). The line of argument leads gradually to embracing statements such as: “to bar from eyesight the distracting influence of manifest reality and to temporarily disembodify, as it were, by sloughing — metamorphosis, menstruation, and sex-swapping being equivalent in this regard — are thus privileged means of grasping the essence of things” (82).

Each of these building blocks becomes recurrent and accrued within new formations, in a protean discursive process not unlike the subject it deals with — metamorphosis. For instance, the bird / snake > dragon connection, found in Odin and then in Tiresias (73-76), finds echoes later on in “the marvelously beautiful mother who departs early, and thereafter frequently assumes the

shape of a bird [*Cinderella*]. In turn, this is "reminiscent of supernatural brides who remain on Earth only as long as their feathered robe stays hidden [*The Swan Maidens*]; which are, in turn, variants of supernatural brides who abide in wedlock only as long as their ophidian nature remains concealed [*Melusine*]" (94).

Lévi-Strauss's canonic formula — the conundrum that has been challenging so many — is also approached in the light of metamorphosis, the touchstone of Vaz da Silva's dynamics of symbolism: "inversion of the function and the term value of two elements in the formula amounts to internalizing an external parameter and externalizing an internal one [...] — that is, to describing metamorphosis" (88).

A bitter-humored description for Chapter 3, "Bloody Tales" — "the depiction of a correlation between a persistent patch of redness in fairy tales and the matching red-blindness of most interpreters" (113) —, is followed by the sub-chapter "Folklorists and Origins", a sour attack on folklorists which, as a folklorist, I should now address. The author blames their "classificatory frame of mind" which makes them "split up any major theoretical problem into as many parts as necessary to dissolve it" (*loc. cit.*). This witty poison was once put in a nutshell in an amicable conversation as follows: "one points to the stars and 'they' look at the finger". It sadly nourishes an antagonism between anthropologists and folklorists that doesn't make much sense any longer. The idea that for a folklorist "an 'original' form ought to be sought" is obsolete for nearly a century; also that "there are such things as 'types' in folktales" (*loc. cit.*) is nowadays downright absurd. The Aarne-Thompson international folktale index, with this vast material indeed organized by types, is an indispensable *vade-mecum*, although it is regarded by all as a mixed blessing. No doubt Vaz da Silva who, like any other scholar dealing with folktales, puts "the Aarne-Thompson" at the top of his bibliography, would have his brilliant study much impoverished if this type catalogue was not around. I am sure that he would also agree that a closer look at allomotifs in a large number of versions of one same type — artificial though that the concept may be — would confirm, refine and accrue the credibility of his remarkable insights. The folklorist will be rightly shocked to read that in versions of *Love Like Salt* (AhTh 923) the father is explicitly also the wooer, when the hallmark of this tale is the implicit, metaphorical "salt" of the love between father and daughter (225). The author means *The Dress of Gold, of Silver and of Stars* (AhTh 510B) when he mentions versions of *Love Like Salt*. Shouldn't the author be curious about the fact that incestuous feelings are consistently metaphorical in one type and explicit in another? He should be grateful to those scholars who study folktales for the love of folktales rather than as tools for some ulterior target. We would all gain immensely in working together and I, for myself, would be glad to escort the author in a guided tour through the Archive of Portuguese Folktales (in our Centro de Estudos Ataíde Oliveira), *organized by types* whose versions would be likely to trigger new and unexpected insights. For instance, Vaz da Silva, who quotes Frazer's account of a "recurring story [blaming] an old menopausal woman for the incapacity of present-day humankind to shed skins and thus rejuvenate like the serpent" (80), would certainly find interesting confirmation to his insight in the Portuguese versions of a certain tale type, *The Skinned Old Woman* (AhTh 877, certainly misplaced among the "novelesque tales" if more emphasis is given to the *marvellous* episode of the bride's changing of skin than to the final death of the old woman due to her inability to do just that).

Chapter 4, *The Core of Fairy Tales*, "brings together [...] such apparently disparate themes as *Cinderella* and *The Dragon Slayer* so as to suggest the deep symbolic unity of all fairy tales", when "the relationship between the unconscious and mythism comes back to the fore" (10). The previous building blocks are now brought into place for an overall picture to come forth. The author's concept of "complex entities"¹ is now approached from several angles to bring into focus the ultimate symbolic identity of the set of figures and lines of action that people fairy tales: "Olrik's 'laws' of Three, of Contrast, and of Twins are inseparable facets of a deeper principle of dynamic unity underlying a landscape of complex entities" (173). And he finds in tale AT 303 (*The Twin or Blood Brothers*), a marvelous ground for his search of hidden identities: "The mother and the witch appear as two images of one same 'motherly' figure operating the death and rebirth of both the King of Fishes and his son, just as the fish and the serpent are two images of a single 'fatherly' figure who dies to be reborn through his son" (175). "In a realm of no return placed with the waters, the hero, identified with his father, meets a synthesis of grandmother, mother, and sister /wife, at whose hands he dies and resuscitates" (176). This composite picture of "complex identities" is amplified later within the same tale, as follows: "the fairy tale hero engaging in erotic embraces falls

¹ This concept has been earlier dealt with by Vaz da Silva in "Complex Entities in the Universe of Fairy Tales", *Marvels and Tales*, vol. 13, nº 2 (2000), pp. 219-243.

beheaded – Freud would read, castrated – to be reborn at the hands of his own mother in turn rejuvenated into a bride” (205).

Clusters of different fairytales crisscross, echoing, confirming and reflecting one another, drawn into the same symbolic pool: “given that to kiss a loathly lady and to slay a dragon are two equivalent means of freeing a bride from her ophidian condition” (180), becoming human and rejuvenating by casting a hide “is what the ‘loathly bride’ [AT 402] motif –variously impersonated by granny and Little Red Riding Hood [AT 333], by the old fairy and the bride in *King Wivern* [AT 433 B], by the old and the young witches at the tower of death [AT 303], and of course by the beautiful mother and Cinderella [AT 510 A and AT 510 B]– is all about” (206).

This conflation of fairy tales is echoed by myths, in rounds of different views also led into merging under the same implosive symbolic drumming. An example: Vaz da Silva brings forth M.-L. Ténèze’s insight² that the fairy tale is the genre which has got the answer before the question is asked, i.e. in which the hero finds the means to deal with a problem before the problem arises (214); this hero is then put into focus as Oedipus, as seen by J.-P. Vernant, under the light of Sophocles: indeed, Oedipus becomes one with his father and a brother to his own children, having conflated three generations in himself because of incest. Child, man and old man, “Oedipus is finally the very enigma he proposes to discover (Vernant)” (213-214); he has therefore given the answer which will be later enacted in him (Ténèze - with a twist from fairy tale to tragedy). Vaz da Silva infers that “the fairy tale’s main character is, structurally, an incestuous one” (214). Am I wrong in seeing mythical thought in the logic of this argument?

Lévi-Strauss ascribed Freud’s greatness to the gift of thinking the way myths do (185). In this mesmerizing study, Vaz da Silva joins this fellowship of myth-makers, in what he says and in the way he says it. The final implosion of many streams of thought reflects the implosion of fairy tales and myths into a monomyth. Thought spirals inwards in a kind of surprisingly creative entropy, “the mind facing itself” (Lévi-Strauss), “the ego taking itself as an object” (Freud), in this “reenacting the millenary workings of symbolic thinking” (242-243).

A. Dundes, who chose *Metamorphosis* to open up his collection “International Folkloristics”, writes in the Preface of this book: “Vaz da Silva has penned an *opus* which, I believe, is destined to change the way future generations of scholars analyze fairy tales” (vii). May these words be an encouragement for it to be read.

² M.-L. Ténèze, “Du conte merveilleux comme genre”, *Arts et Traditions populaires*, 1-3, pp. 11-65.